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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 VATICAN 000197

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SUBJECT: HOLY SEE: HEATED DISCUSSION OF LEBANON AT INTERFAITH  
GATHERING

REF: VATICAN 0194

VATICAN 00000197 001.5 OF 003

CLASSIFIED BY: Christopher Sandrolini, Charge d'affaires a.i.,  
EXEC, State.  
REASON: 1.4 (d)

¶1. Summary. A panel dedicated to Lebanon at the recent interfaith conference in Assisi gives an indication of the strength of feeling in the Rome-based Sant'Egidio community about the conflict in Lebanon. The panel was unusually partisan and emotional, given the context. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Charge d'affaires and Political Officer attended a September 4-5 conference in Assisi entitled "For a World of Peace: Religion and Culture in Dialogue" co-sponsored by the Community of Sant'Egidio, the Diocese of Assisi, and the Umbrian Bishops' Conference. The conference itself is described in reftel; this report describes one of the seventeen substantive panel discussions at the conference. This panel, entitled "The Future of Lebanon", was moderated by Father Vittorio Ianari of the Community of Sant'Egidio; other speakers were Abbas Halabi of Lebanon's Druze community; Maronite Archbishop Paul Matar of Beirut; Seoud El Maoula of the Fondation Shamseddine pour le Dialogue; Tarek Mitri, Lebanese Minister of Culture; and Mohammed Sammak, Political Advisor to the Grand Mufti of Lebanon. The panel thus had representatives from the Druze, Maronite, Catholic, Sunni, and Shia communities.

¶3. (SBU) This panel stood out from the others for several reasons: its more explicitly political focus, its Lebanese-only composition, and its impassioned tone. All speakers pleaded for the international community to support Lebanon in a time of need; all criticized Israel, though to varying degrees. Following is a sampling of each speaker's remarks:

-- Ianari: cited the importance of Lebanon to the late Pope John Paul II, as did several others.

-- Halabi: referred to the "wild war" of Israel against innocents in Lebanon. He cited the support for Lebanon expressed by Pope John Paul II at the first Assisi gathering in 1986, and said that if John Paul were still alive today Lebanon would not have suffered for so long. (Note: later, in his own remarks, Minister Mitri alluded to and softened this implicit criticism of Pope Benedict XVI). Despite Israeli aggression, Lebanese are "still here, and united". Most Lebanese don't agree with those who see Lebanon as an opportune place to fight Israel, though availability of funds from Hizbullah is causing

temptation and dissent. There is no longer an internal balance of power -- this will cause future problems. Many are fleeing. There are now grave economic problems. Despite traditional Druze-Shia problems, Druze opened doors to many thousands of displaced persons anyway. Only moderation/cooperation will work.

-- Matar: said he spoke not from a Maronite but from a unified point of view. This war was totally irrational. Lebanese want sovereignty, peace, democracy, egalitarianism, solidarity with Arabs, and harmony between Christians and Muslims. Faith will see us through. Lebanon, though historically weak, must be maintained as a state. Small countries don't have the same means of security as big ones (implying that they take recourse to the means available). Weapons provided by big countries have armed the factions, this will come back to haunt them. Matar said "I love Jews as brothers" but criticized Israel severely.

-- El Maoula: said he represented a Shia point of view. Pope John Paul II had said Lebanon represented "a message of common life for Christians and Muslims". In the recent conflict, 1200 Lebanese were killed, of whom 500 were children, with another 2520 kids wounded. Hundreds of bridges were destroyed; reconstruction needs will be at least \$14 billion. Lebanon has paid the price of Israeli-Palestinian conflict since 1948. 400,000 Palestinians have been in Lebanon since 1968, at least 6 Israeli invasions have occurred. El Maoula referred to the "so-called war against terror" as above all an American war. Lebanon, a Mediterranean country in danger of disappearing, needs Italy and France. Until an independent Palestine exists, there will be no durable peace. Shia areas, near the Israeli border, have paid the price for their location. Shias want justice for all. Lebanon is necessary for the entire Arab world. Hezbollah should disarm.

-- Sammak: a Sunni, Sammak said "I am as much Christian as a Muslim". Referring to the Bible, he said Jesus had friends in Tyre, and the miracle of wine happened in what is now Lebanon.

VATICAN 00000197 002.5 OF 003

In the Middle East -- with more blood, tears, and prayers than anywhere else -- there is no justice, so there can be no peace. There are fourteen different churches in Lebanon, plus four Muslim communities, plus Jews. Lebanon is the antithesis of Israel -- not a one-religion country but for all religions. Citing events in 1964, 1969, and 1978-2000, he said that despite Resolution 425, nothing had deterred Israeli aggression prior to Hizbullah's success. Sammak said he is a strong critic of the United States and Israel, but not of Jews. He claimed Israel had articulated two objectives at the outset of the conflict: (1) to set Lebanon back by 20 years, in which it succeeded, and (2) to eradicate Hizbullah, in which it failed. Lebanon is haunted by destruction and fear; its young people are fleeing. The Lebanese government did not have advance knowledge of, and did not condone, the abduction of two Israelis, and promptly disavowed it. No peace will be possible without the right of Palestinians to a viable and independent state. Sammak recited the key dates of prior "Israeli aggression". The Koran requires Muslims to accept Judaism and Christianity. Hamas doesn't recognize Israel but this is separate from recognizing Jews.

-- Mitri: thanked Popes John Paul II and Benedict for their concern, and thanked Italy and especially PM Prodi. Italy is now Lebanon's first partner; people were pleased to see Italian troops in Tyre. At the July 26 Rome conference Mitri and his compatriots cried out for a ceasefire; the world heard but did not respond for another 18 days, and even now there is only a "cessation of hostilities" rather than a true cease-fire. Israel had undertaken a "merciless bombardment" and Lebanese are living under collective punishment (blockade) which was both onerous and, perhaps worse, "humiliating". Israel's action was unjustified morally and legally. Some -- but not enough -- in

the United States tried to get Israel to honor its commitment under Resolution 1701. Hizbullah was not created ex nihilo by Iran, but is a political/military movement born in resistance to the 1978-2000 occupation. Middle Easterners are peoples of memory. The credibility of the international community, as custodians of international law, is at stake. Many Israeli actions are crimes, not accidents. After Oslo, there were many attempts at dialogue between Palestinians and Israelis; now it's completely sterile. It is time for the international community to intervene. Hizbullah is part and parcel of Lebanon, not extraneous; strong and popular, it has been strengthened by the conflict. Mitri said that the history of post-2000 violations of the Blue Line, as documented by the UN, shows violations by both Hizbullah and Israel -- the latter with over 10,000 by air -- but the usual pattern was a tit for tat response followed by negotiations.

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Comment  
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¶4. (SBU) We do not know the individual speakers (though Charge spoke at length to Mitri) and defer to Embassy Beirut as to their importance in Lebanon. The panel itself is an indication of strong feelings in the Community of Sant'Egidio regarding the conflict in Lebanon. The Holy See was alarmed by the recent conflict in Lebanon (as reported frequently by post), and Sant'Egidio -- a well-respected and important contact for Embassy Vatican -- has now made clear that it shares this intense concern.

¶5. (SBU) Sant'Egidio itself -- a Catholic lay organization, theologically conservative and politically liberal -- is dedicated to peace and interreligious harmony. It is very active in local charitable activities such as soup kitchens and community development, but also in conflict resolution, particularly in Africa, where it was a key part of peace talks in Mozambique in the early 1990s. It is pro-American (Charge recently attended Sant'Egidio's moving 9/11 commemoration, which it has held every year on that date since 2001) and is trying to expand its membership in the United States; in the spring of 2006 it co-hosted an International Prayer for Peace in Washington. It is also demonstrably committed to building bridges with both Judaism and with Israel, and hosted a previous inter-faith dialogue in Jerusalem in 1995.

¶6. (SBU) There were no Israeli, or Jewish, speakers on the panel, and -- insofar as we could tell -- very few in the packed hall, though there were many present at the Assisi conference; there were a number of questions from the audience following the presentations, but nearly all agreed with the presenters. A senior Sant'Egidio official told Charge that the Community felt morally obliged to include a panel on Lebanon, given the very strong feelings about the Lebanon conflict within the Community; and also that they saw no way to achieve a "balanced" panel

VATICAN 00000197 003.5 OF 003

without running the risk of fistfights. Rather than forgo the issue altogether, Sant'Egidio preferred to go ahead as described above. The Israeli ambassador to the Holy See, also present at the conference but not at the panel, expressed frustration at the way things had turned out -- and strong disagreement with the panel's conclusions -- but is also pursuing a proposal for Sant'Egidio to hold one of its next interfaith conferences in Israel.

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